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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 002352

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LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [ET](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: TRADITIONAL ISLAM UNDER THREAT ACCORDING  
TO SHEIKH

REF: ADDIS ABABA 02133

ADDIS ABAB 00002352 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Janet Wilgus for reasons 1.4 (b)&(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with Charge Huddleston, prominent Ethiopian Muslim leader Sheikh Elias Redman expressed grave concern about the growing Wahhabist influence in Ethiopia, which he said threatens to undermine the moderate Muslim stance of peaceful coexistence with Christians. The Sheikh provided a number of examples suggesting that hard-line voices supported by Saudi Arabia are making inroads within the large Muslim population in Ethiopia. He also shed light on the source of recent protests in Addis Ababa by Muslims, which he blamed on Wahhabist groups in the capital. Redman further noted that the Saudi government had recently ended a special travel arrangement for Hajj pilgrims which he said will undermine the moderate Islamic Council leadership. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On August 15, 2006, Charge, together with DCM, Pol/Econ Counselor and Poloff, met with Sheikh Elias Redman, the deputy chairman of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). The EIASC was created in 1993 to strengthen cooperation among Muslim leaders throughout Ethiopia. It includes elected representatives on a woreda, kebele, zonal, regional and federal level. The federal EIASC approves all imams nominated to serve in any mosque in Ethiopia. The current leadership was installed in 2002 with support from the ruling party to better stem the tide of growing Wahhabist influence and to preserve Ethiopian Muslims' traditional tolerance.

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WAHHABIST INFLUENCE GROWING AMONG ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS  
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¶3. (C) Sheikh Elias said that the EIASC leadership is in crisis due to a lack of funding. The EIASC normally gets a large part of its operational budget from fees collected by issuing special travel documents for Ethiopian pilgrims who participate in the annual Hajj. Sheikh Elias recounted, that this year, the EIASC planned to issue 18,000 travel documents to Ethiopian pilgrims. However, the government of Saudi Arabia decided that all Ethiopian visitors must have passports. He said that many pilgrims, if required to file

for a passport on short notice, will not be able to make the Hajj. Also, the EIASC will not collect fees and will run out of money within a few months.

14. (C) The Sheikh stated that the complications with Saudi travel documents are a part of a larger challenge that the EIASC has in fending off the influence of extremist Wahhabist views, which he stated are being propagated through the cultural office of the Saudi Arabian embassy ("all roads lead back to the Saudi cultural office"). He explained that hardliners from Saudi Arabia are seeking to project their religious beliefs on the traditionally moderate Ethiopian Muslim population, and their efforts have increased significantly during last few years. Ethiopian attempts to stave off this influence have occasionally irritated Saudi extremists. As an example, the Sheikh recalled that the Saudi cultural office recently attempted to import a number of conservative religious books for distribution to religious schools throughout Ethiopia. The Ethiopian customs service is required to review any imported religious material, and these books were found to be "hardline" and prohibited from entry. However, the Sheikh stated that this simply aggravated the situation and other, more subtle means of influence are still taking place. He said a number of recently opened Saudi travel agencies are simply fronts for Wahhabist &faith-based8 groups that are engaged in an information offensive in an attempt to radicalize moderate Muslims in Ethiopia.

15. (C) Redman also informed Charge that Muktar Kedir, the Vice President of the Oromiya region (which has the largest population of Muslims in Ethiopia), is colluding with Saudi Wahhabists in this information campaign. Numerous Islamic seminars taught by Wahhabist extremists from Saudi Arabia are taking place throughout the region. Normally, the EIASC in Oromiya would have to approve such gatherings, which the

ADDIS ABAB 00002352 002 OF 003

Sheikh said has not happened in this case. Rather, Muktar has undermined the EIASC and has granted these groups approval to organize gatherings. The Sheikh also reported there is an armed extremist Muslim group that has attacked a number of traditional mosques and imams in Western Oromiya. However, he feels the GoE is keeping the situation under wraps, so as to prevent "spreading a bad image."

16. (C) The Sheikh said that moderates like himself are struggling to fend off the influence of extremists, partially due to a lack of resources (particularly compared to that of the Saudi backers of this campaign) as well as a lack of support from the GoE. He charged that the influential director of Middle East and Asia bureau at the MoFA, Mahdi Ahmed Gadid, a former Ethiopian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, is pressing senior GoE officials to replace him and other moderate EIASC leaders. This has led the Sheikh to seek (and was granted) a meeting with Prime Minister Meles to ask for assistance. He also requested that the USG use its good relations with the Government of Saudi Arabia to request officials to look into the matter of Wahhabist interference in Ethiopia.

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WAHHABIST BEHIND ARAT KILO INCIDENTS  
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17. (C) Sheikh Elias discussed the recent unrest in Addis Ababa sparked by the destruction of a mosque in the central area of Arat Kilo (reftel), saying what was reported in newspapers was only partially correct. He explained the property on which the mosque was to be constructed was purchased by an individual who received money from a Saudi NGO (an NGO is not legally able to purchase property) at Arat Kilo. The property had contained a residence and a building permit was granted to renovate the house. Regardless, the new owner proceeded to illegally build a mosque and fence around the original structure, which led to city officials

demolishing the newly built mosque. This resulted in large scale demonstrations in Addis Ababa on three consecutive Fridays. The largest clash took place on August 11, for which police were called, resulting in a clash between rock-throwing Muslim protestors and police. (NOTE: Only minor injuries and no deaths were reported in this demonstration. END NOTE) The Sheikh reported that, prior to the break-up of the demonstration, some protestors were calling for PM Meles Zenawi to step down and for the establishment of an Islamic government.

18. (C) Sheikh Elias met with Addis Ababa Mayor Berhanu Deressa to diffuse the issue. The mayor agreed to grant the EIASC a larger tract of empty land on which to build a mosque near Addis Ababa University, not far from the original site. The Sheikh called for the community to relinquish the property at Arat Kilo and to focus efforts towards building a new mosque. The Sheikh reported that hardliners criticized and blamed the EIASC for the destruction of the mosque. Nevertheless, the Sheikh said that the wider Muslim community was satisfied with the new grant of land and there have been no reports of demonstrations since.

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COMMENT: BULWARK AGAINST EXTREMISM UNDER THREAT  
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19. (C) Ethiopian Muslims have traditionally valued peaceful coexistence with Orthodox Christians. The Sheikh fears that if the movement by Wahhabists in Ethiopia were to gather strength, it may disrupt the peaceful balance between the two religions that has existed for several centuries. The EIASC plays a significant role in preserving this commitment to peaceful relations and avoidance of religious-based conflict through its promotion of a moderate Islam to followers. Now the EIASC finds itself under siege by well-funded hardliners spreading fundamental Wahhabist messages in Ethiopia. It will be difficult for poorly-funded local leaders to compete for influence with the Saudi Arabian cultural affairs office in Addis Ababa without more decisive GoE action to thwart Wahhabists. It is also apparent that those intent on discrediting the EIASC leadership are using an existing fissure between the public and the Council as a result of the

ADDIS ABAB 00002352 003 OF 003

EIASC's close ties with the GoE.  
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